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ABSTRACT

This study predicts willingness of refugees to acculturate to North American society based on selected demographic and psychological variables. The hypothesis is that most previous research on refugee adaptation has overemphasized sociological variables such as age, time in the country, and level of education and underemphasized psychological factors such as personality. The sample consisted of 114 Vietnamese refugees enrolled in English classes and 32 Nicaraguan refugees who were drop-in visitors to a Hispanic cultural center. The method involved directing subjects to respond to demographic questions and to a 60-item true-false questionnaire in their respective languages involving psychological dimensions and willingness to acculturate. Responses were analyzed to determine what factors best predicted acculturation scores. Findings indicated that demographic profiles of the two ethnic groups were similar and that demographic factors did not have a significant effect on acculturation scores for either group. Personality factors were also insignificantly correlated with acculturation scores in the Nicaraguan group (possible because Nicaraguans were uncertain whether they could return home or would have to acculturate to life in the United States), but were significantly correlated with acculturation scores for the Vietnamese group. Among all personality factors tested, conscientiousness and likability were the most strongly linked to acculturation scores for the Vietnamese. The conclusion is that although neither demographic nor psychological factors alone can explain acculturation, personality factors outperformed demographic factors in this case study in predicting a willingness to acculturate. The implication of these findings is that acculturation is clearly a psychological as well as a sociological process. (DB)

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PERSONALITY, DEMOGRAPHICS, AND ACCULTURATION IN NORTH AMERICAN REFUGEES

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1980

Abstract

The influx of refugees into the United States in recent years has led to a new interest in acculturation on the part of North American psychologists. Previous research in this area has usually focused on demographic, rather than psychological, variables as predictors of a willingness to acculturate. Using samples of Vietnamese and Nicaraguan refugees, the present study compared personality factors and age, level of education, and time in the U.S. as predictors of acculturation. Although results for the Nicaraguans were mixed, personality factors emerge as being better predictors in the Vietnamese group. This suggests that, in some cases, personality factors may be more basic to the process of acculturation than previously assumed.

L'affluence des réfugiés aux États-Unis dans les années récentes a causé un intérêt nouveau pour l'acculturation chez psychologistes Nord-Américains. Antérieusement, la recherche de ce sujet s'est concentrée davantage sur les variables demographiques que les variables psychologiques comme prédicteurs de l'acculturation. Employant des groupes de réfugiés Vietnamiens et Nicaraguayens, cette étude a comparé des facteurs de la personnalité avec celles de l'âge, de l'éducation, et du temps aux États-Unis comme prédicteurs de l'acculturation. Bien que les résultats pour les Nicaraguayens soient mêlés, les facteurs de la personnalité mieux ont prédit l'acculturation dans le groupe Vietnamien. Cet résultat suggère qu'il est possible que les facteurs de la personnalité soient plus fondamentaux au processus d'acculturation qu'il n'était présumé préalablement.

Running head: Acculturation

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Personality, Demographics, and Acculturation

In North American Refugees

The influx of Cuban and Indochinese refugees into the United States has led to a resurgence of interest in the study of acculturation. Earlier North American research on how minority and ethnic peoples learn the behaviors and values necessary to function effectively in the majority culture generally focused on American Indians and to a lesser extent, American Blacks (cf. Herskovits, 1951; Linton, 1970; Bruner, 1956). As well as the arrival of several hundred thousand refugees over the past few years, continuing problems with undocumented aliens and the growth of the Hispanic population of the United States--projected to be the largest minority in the country by 1990--has given rise to a number of recent empirical and theoretical studies of acculturation (cf. Padilla, 1980; Szapocznik and Kurtines, 1980; Berry, 1980; Olmedo, 1979; Kim, 1979; Smither and Rodriguez-Giegling, 1979; Naditch and Morrissey, 1976).

Ethnic minorities can be classified as one of three types: indigenous, immigrant, or refugee. Although the immigrant and refugee groups may have a number of similarities, they also differ on other dimensions which may affect a willingness or ability to acculturate. For example, the refugee

has far less choice than the immigrant as to where he or she will be accepted, will more likely leave home because of safety rather than economic considerations, and is likely to have endured psychological and physical trauma before reaching asylum (cf. Kung, 1973; Keller, 1975; Heiss, 1969; Volek, 1978). On the whole, most North American acculturation research has concerned immigrants.

Historically, most studies of acculturation done by North American and European social scientists have also focused on the demographic factors which contribute to successful acculturation. With regard to all three types of minorities, demographic factors reported to be the most important in successful adaptation of ethnic groups have included the following: social contacts (Verwey-Jonker and Brackel, 1957); a majority culture member in a minority culture family (Verwey-Jonker and Brackel, 1957; Bruner, 1956); knowledge of the majority language (Ex, 1966; Goldlust and Richmond, 1974); length of time in the new country (Goldlust and Richmond, 1974; Szapocznik, Scopetta, Kurtines, Aranalde, 1978; Verwey-Jonker and Brackel, 1957); a domicile away from other refugees (Ex, 1966; Weinstock, 1969); level of education (Weinstock, 1969), and age (Goldlust and Richmond, 1974; Szapocznik et al., 1978).

Interestingly, few researchers have attempted to identify the personality factors which facilitate acculturation. On the whole, willingness to acculturate has been explained in the literature in terms of sociological variables such as age and level of education, and psychological measurement, where applied, is generally atheoretical and subordinate to other factors.

Nevertheless, some researchers have commented on the importance of individual differences in acculturation:

> The individual personality of the immigrant is a "factor" which is mentioned in almost every adjustment study . . . it seems that the disposition of the immigrant--i.e. his psychophysical equipment and his individual history--contains a collections of variables which are codeterminate for the way in which his adjustment to the new milieu proceeds (Ex, 1966, p. 94).

Whereas most earlier studies of refugee adaptation assert that variables such as time in the host country, level of education, age, income, knowledge of the majority language, etc. will determine rapidity of acculturation, an alternative explanation framed in psychological terms would focus, for example, on such variables as achievement motivation, sociability, anxiety, assertiveness, or intelligence. From a psychological perspective, the demographic approach to explaining willingness to acculturate cannot account for individual differences: i.e. why do some members of the same family adjust to the new environment readily while others never adapt?

The present study sought to determine the viability of a psychological approach to explaining willingness to acculturate as compared with a demographic approach. Specifically, this study considered the possibility of certain dimensions of personality being better predictors of an expressed willingness to acculturate than the demographic variables of age, time in the country, and level of education.

Method

Participants in the study were 114 Vietnamese refugees enrolled in English classes and 32 Nicaraguan refugees who were drop-in visitors to a Hispanic cultural center. Subjects were asked to respond to a 60-item true-false questionnaire in their respective languages and to answer some demographic questions.

The scale used in the study was based upon Hogan's (Hogan, Johnson, Emler, 1978) socioanalytic model of psychological role theory. Hogan has asserted that interpersonal effectiveness is dependent upon the ability to understand and appreciate the role of the other, and that the psychological dimensions most salient in effective role-taking ability are ambition, intellectance, conscientiousness, likability, and mental health (cf. Hogan and Johnson, 1980). This model seems particularly appropriate to persons attempting to function effectively in a foreign culture.

In addition to statements assessing psychological dimensions, twelve additional items measuring willingness to acculturate were included as the dependent variable. These items were based on Campisi's measure of acculturation (Weinstock, 1969). Reliabilities for the scales averaged about .50 in both languages, which was judged acceptable given the brevity of the scale and the exploratory nature of the research.

Although the scales were in different languages, a *t*-test of congruency was used to determine if the structure of responses was similar in both groups. A non-significant correlation between response structures, however, necessitated separate analyses. Responses were analyzed by

multiple regression to determine what factors best predicted acculturation scores.

Results

With regard to demographics, the groups differed significantly only in time in the United States, with the Nicaraguans having been in the country slightly longer than the Vietnamese. With regard to personality variables, the Nicaraguans scored significantly higher in intellectance, likability, and mental health. There were no significant differences in conscientiousness or ambition scores, nor was the difference in acculturation scores significant.

INSE
TABL
ONE

In the case of the Vietnamese, personality factors accounted for the greatest part of the variance in willingness to acculturate. The R^2 value for personality factors alone was .22734 ($F=6.5253$, $p<.001$). The addition of the demographic factors of time in the country, education, and age contributed little to R^2 and had the consequent effect of suppressing the F value of the combination of variables predicting to acculturation. The combination of personality, time, education, and age had an R^2 value of .23432, and increase of .0081 over personality alone in accounting for variance, but a lowered F value of 4.07992 ($p<.001$).

INSE
TABL
TWO

Personality factors alone accounted for only .13183 of the variance in the acculturation scores of the Nicaraguans ($F=.7592$, ns), and the combination of personality, time, education, and age accounted for .26931 ($F=1.0136$) of the variance, which was still non-significant.

In the Vietnamese group, personality factors most predictive of a willingness to acculturate were conscientiousness (β=.2745; F=9.232, p<.005) and likability (β=.3652; F=15.481, p<.001). Ambition, intellectance, and mental health scores had no significant effect on acculturation score.

Discussion

Neither personality nor demographic factors were effective predictors of acculturation scores in the Nicaraguan group. This may be due to the small size of the population, but it may also be explained by the political situation in Nicaragua at the time of the assessment. At the time the data was collected, the outcome of the civil war was uncertain. Probably the refugees were themselves uncertain whether they would have to acculturate to life in the United States or would be able to return to Nicaragua.

For the Vietnamese group, return to Vietnam is, at least for the foreseeable future, an impossibility. Acculturation is a fact of life and the refugees are being given formal instruction in North American ways of life in their English classes. Within the Vietnamese group, conscientiousness and likability clearly outperformed the other personality factors as well as the demographic variables in predicting acculturation scores. This finding provides indirect support for earlier studies which emphasized the importance of social contacts in acculturation. In order to succeed socially, one must first of all be likable; in order to be liked, one needs to pay conscientious attention to the rules which govern social interaction, particularly in a different culture. Clearly, those Vietnamese who are successful at doing this are more willing to learn the new majority culture.

The hypothesis of the present study--that personality factors would outperform demographic factors in predicting a willingness to acculturate--was confirmed in the Vietnamese group. Nevertheless, the present study should be regarded as an indicator of directions for further research rather than a definitive statement on the importance of personality factors in acculturation. Reliability of the present scale needs to be improved, and the possibility of other personality dimensions which may be more relevant to the issue of acculturation need to be explored.

One importance inference which can be made from the empirical evidence of the present study is that acculturation is clearly a psychological, as well as sociological process. Earlier studies which focused on demographic indices of acculturation may have missed out on the more basic motives which contribute to a willingness to acculturate. On the whole, psychologists are latecomers to the study of acculturation, but the present study suggests that their presence may be essential to understanding the most basic parts of the process.

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Table I

Comparisons of Mean Refugee Scores
On Demographic and Personality Variables

	Vietnamese N=114		Nicaraguan N=32		
	$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD	t
Age[1]	2.261	1.05	2.097	1.01	.8028
Education[2]	1.670	0.59	1.903	0.65	1.4456
Time in U.S.[3]	1.661	0.84	2.161	1.16	2.3691*
Ambition	5.530	1.96	5.968	2.11	1.5005
Intellectance	3.104	1.62	5.089	1.45	8.0831**
Conscientiousness	7.104	1.81	6.710	1.72	1.4794
Likability	4.574	1.75	6.032	4.57	5.3908**
Mental Health	4.887	1.87	6.130	2.67	3.8833**
Acculturation	7.638	1.84	7.161	2.40	1.5606

*p<.02

**p<.001

[1] 1=under 20
2=20-29
3=30-39
4=40-49 etc.

[2] 1=less than h.s. graduate
2=high school graduate
3=some college

[3] 1=less than 6 mos
2=6 mos-12 mos
3=13 mos-24 mos

Table II

R^2 and Levels of Significance of Factors

Contributing to Acculturation Scores

Vietnamese		
Personality factors	.22734	6.41416*
Personality, time in the U.S.	.23449	5.51360*
Personality, time, education	.23530	4.70346*
Personality, time, education, age	.23543	4.07992*
Nicaraguan		
Personality factors	.13183	.75921
Personality, time in the U.S.	.18819	.92725
Personality, time, education	.20949	.87074
Personality, time, education, age	.26931	1.01358

*p<.001